



Inmates help with Executive Mansion garden maintenance

By Lauren Leone-Cross July 11, 2013

On Tuesday, a Lincoln Correctional Center guard and two inmates made a 40-minute drive from Lincoln to downtown Springfield, arriving at the gates of the Executive Mansion.

What happens next may go unnoticed and unappreciated by most, but not by Harry Lewis, horticulturist for the site's garden that spans a city block at Fourth and Jackson streets — a garden that sees about 40,000 visitors each year and serves as colorful backdrop for the 158-year-old mansion.

Once inside the gates, the two men spend the next five hours enveloped by the humid July day, devoted to maintenance or construction work, planting flowers and trees, or pulling weeds — for no pay and without complaints.

“I’m glad we’re offered the opportunity to come out here to do this,” said 48-year-old Robert Kyle, an Aurora resident serving out a multi-year sentence at the minimum-security prison in Lincoln. “It helps the time pass, and it makes me feel like I’m still a part of the community. I’m not locked in a cell.”

Kyle was sent to prison in January 2012 for manufacturing, delivery and possession of an illegal controlled substance.

‘No budget’

In a budget-conscious environment, Lewis said the help from Kyle and a second inmate, James Whitaker, 42, of Decatur, is without a doubt what keeps the garden as thriving as it is.

Hired help is out of the question, said Lewis, who signed on as the mansion's horticulturist in 2009.

"There really is no budget. Really, the goal is to just spend as little as I can," Lewis said. "It's pretty challenging. The guys we have right now are really good. One of the guys is very into it and goes almost nonstop, but it's hard because some people feel (the garden) is still not at the level as it should be. I mean, we're trying, but it's not perfect."

Both Kyle and Whitaker assist Lewis five days a week.

Because Lewis has to rely heavily on botanical and monetary donations, what he can plant each year is somewhat unpredictable. The one thing that is predictable is Whitaker and Kyle's arrival each weekday morning.

"I think that man would be working double shifts, seven days a week, and still not be able to get it all done if it wasn't for us," Kyle laughed, adding that he specializes in fixing mechanical equipment and has managed to repair nearly every leaf blower, tiller and mower he's gotten his hands on. That's repair work Lewis can't afford to take elsewhere.

In November, Kyle and Whitaker set up more than a dozen Christmas trees inside the mansion so local organizations could decorate them for the holidays. It's a time of year that's difficult for Kyle, who has four children in his hometown of Aurora.

"It is rough. It's the time I'd like to be at home," he said.

Finding a purpose

To qualify for the Lincoln Correctional Center's community work crew program, which sends inmates to sites such as the Executive Mansion and the Illinois State Fairgrounds, warden Kess Roberson said the inmates have to be within so many years of their release dates on non-violent charges.

"Our goal, my goal, is to provide them with the tools for when they leave the facility so they can be productive for their families, for themselves and for society," Roberson said. "While they're working for how ever long they're out here, they might not even see themselves as inmates. They're seeing something in them that no one else has seen, or they've never seen before."

For Whitaker, a 42-year-old Decatur resident who's serving a multi-year prison sentence for forgery with a projected parole date of Oct. 30, 2015, that's why he doesn't take this opportunity for granted. With previous experience in landscaping, greenhouse care, construction, and even cutting trees for his father's business, Whitaker said he's glad to work in a familiar environment.

"It's a job to me. If this were my own company, I would do it just the same," Whitaker said. "When people come in, they say the place looks great and that means a lot to me. I take a lot of pride in my work."

Whitaker just recently fixed the irrigation system around the fence that lay dormant and broken for nearly eight years due to a rusted-out controller. The funds aren't there to update the entire system, he said.

"It took me two days, and that's only because I had to wait on the parts. It's nice to know that when I get out of here, I can look back and say, 'Hey, I did that,'" Whitaker said.

June 18 marked Whitaker's one-year anniversary working at the mansion — and Tuesday's shift was his last. He received the news Tuesday morning that he'll be entering into a work-release program, but isn't sure where just yet.

Working at the mansion has helped prepare him for life outside of prison, Whitaker said, adding that he hopes to eventually find a job in landscaping or a similar field once he's done.

"I'm 42 years old. I'm going to be almost 45 when I get out, so I got 20 good years in me to build a retirement," he said.

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